

are of some relevance to refugees and political asylum issues, namely: the European Treaties, ranging from the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights to the Dublin Conventions and the Schengen treaties; and the institutions of the European Communities, such as the European Parliament and the European Court. The annexes and bibliography to this section will facilitate further research.

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**Varieties of the Tamil Refugee Experience in Denmark and England.** By Ann-Belinda Steen. Copenhagen: Minority Studies, 1993. xiv + 236 pp. (Europe) DKr 156. ISBN 87-88847-04-7.

Ann-Belinda Steen's study of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees is based on doctoral fieldwork conducted in London and Denmark during 1988 and 1989. The book's publishers, Minority Studies at the University of Copenhagen, have, with some additions, reproduced Steen's PhD thesis in an inexpensive, clear and large format. It is the first book length study of Tamil asylum-seekers and will appeal to all interested in refugee issues.

The *varieties* of the Tamil refugee experience, referred to in the title, emerge out of Steen's specific interest in the Tamil diaspora from within an anthropological approach to refugee studies. Whilst the reader is given snapshots of Tamil exiles' life in Europe the book is not primarily an ethnography about a migrant group. Neither is it a detailed study of the circumstances which led to, and characterized, the flight of Tamils from Sri Lanka.

The varieties of experience refer to the challenges offered by the refugee phenomenon to western governments and European politics, to academia, to traditional anthropology, and lastly to individual asylum-seeking Tamils. What Steen is searching for is a rethinking of refugee research which moves our understanding beyond redundant acculturation studies and turgid statistical reports.

There are two strands to her work. The first, which bears similarities to Robinson's recently edited *The International Refugee Crisis—British and Canadian Responses* (1993), places side-by-side the refugee reception and settlement policies of Britain and Denmark, whilst the second tackles the complex issue of asylum-migration, community and cultural change.

Part 1 of the book presents the context in which both of these discussions take place. Chapter 2 is a historical overview of post-colonial Sri Lanka and charts the rise of both Tamil and Sinhala nationalism. The discussion ends with the breakdown of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord and makes only scant reference to divisions between Tamil militant groups, their support bases and the controversial nature of LTTE control (as documented by the formerly Jaffna-based University Teachers for Human Rights). Chapters 3 and 4 critically reassess the pre-1980 ethnographic construction of Tamil social organization in the light of refugee or exile culture.

Part 2 examines the impact of refugee policy on Tamils in London and the Danish town of Herning. The Danish government's conscientious provisions for extensive language and skills training appears to have nannied many refugees into a state of almost subservient inactivity, contrasting starkly with London's Thatcher Boys (and girls?) who have been left alone to seize opportunities in certain employment niches.

Part 3, 'Re-creating Tamilness', is Steen's attempt to grapple with the issues of asylum-migration and social and cultural change through 'reflections on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees' (p. 75). The ethnography is based on the stock-in-trade of anthropology,

participant observation and interviews. Steen's theoretical approach, in which the object can neither be counted, defined nor described (p. 195), has excluded large-scale surveys or extensive archival research. Subsequently much of the ethnographic information is drawn from leading lights in the various communities.

Following Barth (1989), the author boldly inscribes a cultural benchmark against which change can be measured. A benchmark 'Tamilness' is set against notions of 'order', politics, religious tradition and cultural practice in the context of 'refugeeism' which is described as incoherent and fragmented. Out of this incoherence unfold 'streams' of cultural traditions in exile situations' (pp 81–83). Through this approach Steen has sought to understand cultural change, not as a function of host-relocatee interaction, but as a process arising out of culturally-situated constructions of reality.

Steen's analysis of cultural change is, however, in places, surprisingly static. There may be two reasons for this. Her study is poorly supported by the kind of material which would allow for a detailed description of the diverse nature of Tamil exile groups in terms of origin, status, asylum motives, experiences of conflict etc. Her cultural benchmark is built around a Jaffna Vellalar-centred ethos which may be inappropriate when applied to the many communities which have their roots in Colombo or the islands off the peninsula such as Pungudutheevu, and are non-Vellalar. The lack of ethnographic data raises doubts about the relevance of the cultural model.

Secondly, the dynamics of exile communities, be they political, social or cultural, will be continually influenced by events and changes occurring 'at home'. Out of the conflict rapid social transformation is taking place in all Sri Lankan Tamil areas, and the emerging 'streams' of traditions, which Steen sets out to recognize, will stagnate without an analysis which incorporates the essential linkages between changes occurring on the island and changes occurring in exile communities.

That said, however, frustratingly little has been written about the continuing Tamil diaspora, and Steen's book is both welcome and timely. Future works will be able to build on this study and with the inclusion of painstaking empirical research be able to address in a thorough way the important issues raised in the book.

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**BARTH, F.** (1989) 'The Analysis of Culture in Complex Societies'. I *Ethnos* Vol. 3–4.

**ROBINSON, V.** (ed.) (1993) *The International Refugee Crisis — British and Canadian Responses*, London: Macmillan.